

North-West ROMANCES



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Outlaw of the Snows

By H. S. M. KEMP

"Save your own skin first!"—that's the prime rule of the Northland. But square-shooting Billy Nelson, fugitive from Redcoat law, turned his back on the freedom trail—only to learn that gratitude never swerves a Mountie!

BILLY NELSON, tall, square-rigged and twenty-four, pulled his six gray and white huskies to a stop before the general store at Jackpot, and strode inside. At the rear was a door leading into a two-by-four office. It was marked "Private." Nelson shoved open the door without knocking and closed it gently behind him.

The thick-set, slack-mouthed man at the desk turned his head. He nodded a short greeting.

"All set?"

Nelson did not answer at once. He lounged over against the wall near the stove. Drawing a package of tobacco from a pocket inside his hairy parka, he began rolling a cigaret. Not until he lighted it and flicked away the match, did he speak.

"Don't know, Jeff. Maybe. I've quit."

"What?"

The slack-mouthed one turned around abruptly.

Nelson smiled casually. "I've got the mail contract to Sturgeon Portage. Starts in a month. That'll take all my time."

"Good night!" The other, Jeff, digested this. Then: "Any money in it?"

"Hundred a month."

Jeff smiled indulgently. "And yuh mean t' say yuh figure on quittin' me fer that blamed job? Th' way it is now I pay yuh seventy-five a trip, and two trips a month 'is easy fer yuh."

Nelson returned the smile.

"Sure." He lowered his voice. "But a hundred per for Government work is a bit easier on the nerves than running booze to the Indians at a hundred and fifty."

Jeff grunted. "Cold feet?"

"Cut that!" The other's blue eyes turned to chilly gray. "No. Fact is, I'm getting married, and the two don't gee. Peggy knows that I've been crowded once and got off with a fine. She's game enough to overlook that, since she thinks I'm running straight now. Anyway, it's a lousy business, this booze game, and I don't need the money any longer. I've enough to quit."

Jeff cackled mirthlessly.

"Th' game was fine when yuh needed th' money. Now that yuh've got what yuh needed, it's rotten, eh? Pretty good," he sneered.

Nelson looked at him coldly, his lips a thin line. As he leaned against the wall he did not look what he was, a booze-runner to the natives. There was nothing of the degenerate about him; his face was too open and frank. Rather was it the face of a boy, keen for adventure and excitement.

"And what about me?" Suddenly Jeff altered his tone. "Ain't yuh lettin' me down a bit? Here I got ten dozen all packed and ready for Bud Jackson up at th' gold camp, and yuh quit. I've treated yuh square, Billy, and it seems like yuh're doin' me dirt."

For an instant a look of indecision came into the eyes of the other. Jeff saw it. He struck while the iron was hot.

"O' course, it's up t' yuh. If yuh're bound t' quit, yuh will. But th' least yuh c'd have done was t' give me th' chance t' find another man. Go one more trip fer me, Billy, and I'll raise the ante to eighty bucks."

"Tisn't that," came back Nelson, hastily. "I'm not gold-digging, but I just naturally

want to quit. The booze'll have to go."

"But jest this trip," wheedled Jeff.

For a moment there was silence. Nelson looked down, tracing a pattern on the floor with the toe of his elaborately embroidered moccasin, a frown beneath the heavy otter-skin cap he wore.

"Yuh got all kinds o' time," put in the tempter. "Yuh'll be back in ten days, and yuh say th' mail job is a month yet."

Nelson looked up, still frowning.

"All right," he said shortly. "Just this once. But for the next trip, find somebody else."

AN hour later he made up his load. On his big, flat oak sleigh he piled four hundred pounds of freight and liquor, grub and his blankets. When everything was packed in snugly, he drew the canvas cover up and lashed the whole firmly to the sleigh.

But before he started he had one more mission. He walked to a cottage a few feet back from the main road, knocked on the door, and stepped inside.

A girl seemed to be expecting him. The top of her curly, bobbed head barely came to his shoulder, a dainty little thing, dark-eyed and glowing.

"All ready to start, Billy? There's a cup of tea waiting and a piece of pie. You may as well spare the ten minutes and eat it."

The man looked at her, and then thought of the load on his sleigh. Peggy—and booze! Some combination! If she knew the kind of man he really was, she'd drop him so quick he'd bounce. And here he was, living to her a black-faced lie. Instead of supplies, he was hauling the rot-gut stuff that turned men into beasts. But after this trip. . . .

"Here you are!"

Peggy's voice shattered his self-reproach. She slid a chair forward and he sat down.

A few minutes later, ready to leave, he stood at the door, one hand on the latch, the other around her shoulder.

"Don't stay longer than you can help, Billy, will you? Ten days is a short time for you on the trail, but for me in the village it's years!"

He laughed softly. "Not longer than I can help. One trip to the gold fields—my

first trip with the mail—then wedding bells for two!"

And he bent over and kissed her full on her smiling lips.

TWO days away, and fifty miles from Jackpot, Nelson came to a fork in the road. The junction was in a big muskeg of stunted spruce and withered tamaracks. To the north, still a hundred miles away, were the outposts to which he was heading. Due east, fifty miles distant, was the railroad construction camp at Mile 341 . . . and Bliss.

Nelson did not care to think too much about Bliss. The freckle-faced, lanky corporal of the Red Coats knew a thing or two. He knew, for instance, that Nelson had been convicted a year before for booze-running. The policeman had not since checked him up, but Nelson felt sure that if the corporal ever met him on the trail he would search his load.

Against this, Nelson trusted in two things: one was luck, and the other was the speed of his dogs. He had great faith in his dogs. Few trains there were in the north that could touch his six snarling cross-bred wolves in a straight race or in an endurance test.

Suddenly, from his leader came a whine, and the six hit forward at a faster clip. Like a deer at a water hole, the man suddenly grew alert. He jumped for the tail of the toboggan. He dragged his foot in the deep snow at the side of the trail and pulled the dogs down to a walk.

"Whoa!" he called softly. Obediently they stopped, the leader still whining with eagerness. Nelson walked up to him and gave the command to lie down. Then, very cautiously, he moved ahead.

For fifty yards he crept. Then he caught the sharp smell of wood smoke. Undoubtedly someone was boiling his noonday kettle, Nelson decided. Then ahead of him, a dog barked. An answering bark came from one of his own team.

"Spike, dang ye! 'Shut up!'" a man shouted.

Nelson sighed with vast relief. The voice was that of old Pete Findlay, a trapper he had known for years.

He moved forward, reassured. A twist in the trail brought him on a camp-fire and a string of snarling dogs.

"Hey, Pete!" he called, and Findlay turned swiftly.

"Billy!" and then to his leader: "Spike, ye devil! I'll brain ye!"

Nelson turned and whistled shrilly, and soon his own train came tearing down the trail. For some minutes he had his hands full to preserve the peace between his dogs and Findlay's. But at length he unlashed his grub box and carried it to the fire.

"Goin' to boil with me, Bill?" queried the old trapper.

"Sure; and keep good company for once," was the grinning reply.

Findlay looked at him keenly from under the white tufts of his eyebrows. He did not speak until later, when, hunched up in his parka, Billy waited for his kettle to boil.

"Still runnin' fer Stokes?"

The younger man nodded. Findlay lifted his cup, shaking his head.

"Ye're a danged fool, Billy. So far, ye've got by, but there's a twist to every trail."

Nelson grinned, half-ashamed.

"But until then . . .? Anyway, this is my last trip. Going on the mail run to Sturgeon Portage next month."

"Yeh?" Genuine pleasure shone in the old man's eyes. "Glad to hear of it. Ye're not th' kind of boy, Billy, to be doin' Stokes' dirty work fer him, and ye'll thank th' day ye quit him." He set down his cup. "Hear, too, ye're gettin' married. Yeh? She's a fine little lady. If ye quit this booze game, I'll congratulate the both of ye!"

Nelson grinned his thanks and commenced to eat.

"But there's one thing," continued the trapper. "They're expecting Bliss up at th' gold fields. He's due on patrol. So if ye've got anything ye want t' get rid of, step on 'er!"

"So?" Nelson's eyes widened with surprised interest. "In that case I will. Thanks for the tip."

He laughed it off, but the laugh was a trifle strained.

For the next few minutes there was a near silence, save for a pop from the fire and an occasional word from old Findlay. In that interval Nelson finished his meal.

He pitched his used dishes into the

grub box and loaded the box onto his sleigh. After feeding his dogs a scrap of dried fish, he went back to the carpet of boughs by the fire and began rolling a cigaret.

Suddenly, from one of the dogs came a mouthy growl, answered immediately by a clamor of barking from the two trains. Nelson went suddenly tense. The half-made cigaret crumpled in his fingers. Something told him that danger was behind him. Slowly he turned around. His face suddenly went pale. For, standing in the trail, fur-coated and armed, was Bliss.

NELSON'S jaw set hard. For a moment he fought for his composure. Then, getting himself in hand, he smiled easily.

"Lo, Corp!" he called. "Didn't expect to see you here."

The policeman did not return the smile.

"Let's have a look at your load, Bill," he said shortly.

Nelson ventured a bluff.

"My load! What d'you mean?"

"Doesn't matter," was the curt response.

"Stay where you are!"

He came forward to Nelson's sleigh and commenced to loose the lashings.

For a moment Billy was tempted to stake all in one swift rush. But the chilly sight of Bliss' service revolver in its holster checked the impulse. Half-hypnotized, he stood and watched the other's actions.

He saw him spread open the cover, toss the bedding to one side, and then lift and shake each case. At one he bent his head, listening closely while he shook it. Then, with his eyes fixed warily on the two at the fire, he picked up an axe and began to pry off the lid.

There was a creaking as the nails drew out, the rustle of straw. Bliss grunted in satisfaction as his eye fell on the top layer of two dozen bottles of bootleg whiskey.

"So you're still at it, eh?"

The policeman's voice was strangely quiet, but strangely threatening. Nelson's heart began to pound madly. The future flashed before him—jail, he a convict . . . and Peggy.

And who was to blame? Himself, yes, but what of Jeff, the devil behind it all? He ground his teeth, cursing himself for

a weak-kneed fool in yielding to Jeff's guile.

"You're under arrest, Bill, and I'll have to take you out—"

Bliss was speaking, and at the words a wild, desperate light flared in Nelson's eyes. The policeman saw it, and came over to where he was standing.

"And don't get ugly," he cautioned, "or you'll go out in irons."

Suddenly something snapped in Nelson's brain, and in a mad moment he lashed out, quick as the dart of a snake.

"No irons for me!" he roared, and his fist crashed on Bliss' jaw.

From behind, Findlay let out a strangled yell. The policeman's head flew back, dropped forward again. With knees sagging, he crumpled to the snow.

"Billy!" again yelled Findlay. "Boy, you've done it now!"

Deaf to all in the mad panic that convulsed his brain, Nelson leaped for his sleigh. Frantically he stripped his load. He heaved it to one side and pitched on his blankets and grub box. But as he strung his dogs into line he saw a movement from the man in the snow.

"Diamond!" he screamed to his leader. "*Mar-r-che!*"

The dogs sprang to their collars and the sleigh started. Down the trail they swept and around the first bend. Then he heard the voice of Bliss.

"Stop, or I'll shoot!"

His answer was another yell at the dogs and they sped even faster for the spruce that would hide the camp from view. Two revolver shots crashed across the snow. The bullets thudded into the trees behind him.

FOR three days Nelson had fled, forsaking the hard-packed road, hitting cross-country for the trails and trapping paths of the Hatchet Lake Chipewyans. A dozen times he had cursed himself for that one mad blow. Impossible was it now to return. There was a jail sentence waiting for his whisky-running charge, and at least another six months for his unwarranted assault on Bliss.

The hours were sheer torture. Ahead of his dogs he ran on the narrow snowshoes which were intended only for trail use. At night he sat, desolate, before a

smoky fire with the ghostly trees latticed against the cold, white moon.

He was short of grub, short of fish for the dogs. He had no gun, for on his trips he had no use for one: moose and deer were too bulky to bother with, and wolves were an inconsequential factor. But now, unless he fell on meat of some kind, the future was discouraging, direful.

Ahead of the dogs he turned the matter over in his mind, doubtful of the ultimate issue of the struggle. Then, at the darkest hour, he blundered on a snowshoe track coming from the northeast.

"Thank the Lord!" he breathed, almost reverentially. He stood to one side to let his slow-moving dogs come into the hard-packed trail.

Nelson recognized by the webbing and the shape of the frames that the tracks had been made by a white man, probably a trapper. He pressed on eagerly, trusting that before long he would reach the camp of the unknown. For the camp would surely mean supplies both for himself and his dogs.

For an hour he traveled, the sun rapidly sinking in an amber sky. Then, suddenly, with a crashing re-echo, a rifle-shot rang across the wastes. It was followed in a moment by two more.

Nelson stopped his dogs abruptly, for the sound came from the direction of the trail he had broken, to the east. An explanation struck him.

"Bliss! Taking a crack at a deer!"

Dread seized him. He had misjudged the policeman, or rather Bliss' dogs; even allowing for the bend in the trail, his pursuer could not be more than ten miles' travel behind him.

On the point of starting again, he froze once more, for the single shots had developed into a regular cannonade of firing.

With sudden resolve he pulled his dogs into the shelter of a scraggly spruce. He tightened the thongs of his snowshoes and struck across in the direction of the firing.

For a half-mile he swung ahead, soundless save for the whoosh of the snow he kicked up before him, and the grunt of his webs. Then, just as he was wondering if his sense of direction were still true, he stopped short, for ahead across his path was another snowshoe track, wide and deep cut. He examined the sign. It was the

unquestionable brand of a white man's racquet.

One glance showed him that it was not that of Bliss, for the policeman affected Indian-made snowshoes; nor was it of the same pattern as those he had been following with his dogs. He moved ahead with greater caution.

Before him was a slight elevation, a jack-pine ridge. He climbed to the top, but suddenly dodged back quickly, for beneath him figures were moving.

CAUTIOUSLY he raised his head. His first glance showed him Bliss' dogs, straining and growling in their harness, the sleigh rolled over on its side. And then he saw the rest.

There were four men: Bliss was one, recognizable by his parka and service cap, and three others, two in mackinaws and one in a blanket-coat. All save Bliss were armed.

There was considerable loud talk, but Nelson could catch only a few words. Then suddenly the man in the blanket-coat lashed out with his fist, and Bliss crumpled to the snow. For a moment he lay there and then sprang to his feet. He drove a hard right at his assailant. This was the signal for a general rush. Once again the policeman reeled backwards and fell. Two of the others went down with him.

Nelson decided to learn, if he could, what it was all about. While the attention of all four men was centered on the fight he began a swift descent of the hill. From spruce tree to ragged willow bluff he jumped, and at last was able to crouch down, shielded from view, a bare dozen paces from the others.

He heard grunts and livid imprecations. Then one man profanely yelled for a rope. Nelson took a chance and raised his head. He saw the policeman held down by two of the men; a third was making for Bliss' sleigh. There was another struggle, but it was cut short as the third man returned with the rope. In a moment the three stood up, leaving Bliss securely lashed.

In the interval Nelson took time to look the men over closely. All were bearded, all wolfish-looking. Two were thickset. The one in the blanket-coat was a blond giant. Bliss himself was wild-looking, for one eye was discolored and closing. Blood

was pouring from an ugly gash on his forehead. But he held his head up defiantly.

"Now what?" The blond one broke the silence.

"Bump him off," was the hasty answer.

"And if y'ask me, I don't know what we bothered ropin' him fer. He's got dogs and he's got grub. We've got neither. Knock 'im on th' head, 'r slit his throat."

The blond man demurred, but the other two howled him down.

"What's one more, anyway? We might's well be hung fer sheep as goats." The speaker laughed evilly at his wit. "Anyhow, th' wolves 'll finish the job."

Nelson's breath came quickly at the monstrosity of the thing. The cold-blooded way they discussed Bliss' fate made his flesh creep. Bliss was nothing to him, in fact he was his enemy, but . . .

Suddenly a horrible temptation came to him: Why interfere? Bliss was indeed his enemy, and it was not up to him to interfere. Let Bliss be "bumped off" and let the road to freedom be opened for himself. All he had to do was to turn away while the three did their ghastly work. Then he could head for civilization and say that he had found the dead man beside the trail. The many tracks would testify for him.

At the thought he began to shiver. Was it worth it? On the one hand stood his liberty—and Peggy. On the other . . . What?

Before he could decide the tall man came forward with a suggestion.

"Tell ya what: One of us change duds with him! If we ever run into anybody, a cop takin' two men out 'll get us by. What' ja say?"

The idea seemed to catch the imagination of the listeners, for without waiting for more words they hauled Bliss to his feet, and unlashed the rope.

Bliss was not going to submit, however, without a struggle. He suddenly bent his head and rammed the leader in the pit of the stomach, sending him reeling backwards. The second man's fist flew out, and the third rushed in with his gun swung up as a club.

Nelson sucked a whistling breath. Gad! Three to one, and the one wounded! One unarmed wearer of the Red Coat against three devils. . . .

HE suddenly found himself crashing through the willows. And he was yelling like a madman.

"Hey, you damnable swine! Hey! Hang on, Bliss!"

He almost tripped over one man rising to his feet. In passing him Nelson shot out his moccasined foot viciously. The man fell back again, coughing up two of his teeth. A gun lay in his path; unthinking he heaved it into the bush. Then with his bare hands he tore into the two before Bliss.

His fingers caught one man by the throat; with a thud they went to the ground. Over they rolled; twice, and Nelson was on his feet. He saw Bliss running toward him, yelling encouragement. Then an arm was around his neck. He tore himself free, swung around and came face to face with the blond giant, to look down into the yawning mouth of a Service revolver. Instinctively Nelson ducked. There was a shattering roar, and a bullet tore the otter-skin cap from his head.

Nelson dropped to his knees, seized the man by the legs and threw him. Before the other could rise, Nelson had him, one arm locked around his neck, his right hand grasping the gun-hand of the other.

The man made a thrashing twist, and Nelson was beneath another lunge, and he was on top. In the snow, gasping and panting, the two struggled for possession of the revolver. There was no science; no attempt to hold the other still. All that mattered was to control that messenger of death. Another twist, and an animal-like snarl from the man he fought; another squirming heave from Nelson. . . . Then the gun roared again.

Suddenly, the world spinning, Nelson found himself free. He crawled to his knees, gasping. He looked on the twisted features of the man he had fought. In the agonized outlines he saw horrified surprise written deep, the surprise of one seized in the chill grip of death.

He gasped, and shut his eyes to close out the sight.

From behind came a sickening crunch . . . a grunt. Then came the coughing voice of Bliss.

"All over . . . they're done."

FIVE nights later, three men sat around the pot-bellied stove in the policeman's

log shack at Mile 341. There were Nelson, Bliss and old man Findlay.

"Here they are." Bliss drew an enclosure from an official envelope and pushed it across the table. "Once the photos didn't lie; it's them all right. Wanted for holding up the paymaster at the Lost Hope Mine. Never heard anything about it till I got back last night and found this waiting for me. Furthermore, I don't suppose I'd have ever got them if I hadn't run on them accidentally like I did."

"But the money?" put in Findlay.

"We found it on them, thirty-three thousand."

Nelson said nothing, in fact had scarcely spoken a word since the day of the fight. Bliss looked at him curiously.

"What's the matter, Bill? You're glum as a wet week."

Nelson sighed and looked up slowly.

"I can't get that bird's face out of my mind. He was the one who wanted to help you. . . . And I killed him."

Bliss nodded sympathetically. "I know, old man." He looked to the heavily barred door leading to the cells. "But he was the luckiest of the three; he got it swift and sudden."

Nelson rose to his feet.

"Guess I'll hit the hay."

He turned toward the door. Bliss drew a key from his pocket and snapped open the lock.

"Look, Billy," he said kindly. "I won't bother locking the cell you're—er—using, but I'll have to lock this main door. Matter of course, you know," he added awkwardly.

"I understand. Good night." And with the listless words Nelson stepped toward the cells.

Bliss came back and sat down. He was frowning as he filled his pipe.

"Billy takes it hard."

Findlay nodded, plucking at his goatlike beard.

"By the way," he asked in a lowered voice. "What happens to *him*?" and he jerked a thumb in the direction Nelson had gone.

"Billy? Oh, he'll get off; get off with a vote of thanks, I'd say," and Bliss grinned knowingly. Suddenly he got to his feet and crossed to his grub box in the corner. "Which reminds me; I'll have to take along those samples of Billy's particular

brand." He drew out two bottles which had formed part of Nelson's load.

Findlay looked at him broodingly. "All ye got?"

"Sure, but it's enough. I wasn't going to haul the whole load back for evidence, so I saved these and destroyed the rest."

He set the bottles on the table and came back to his chair. Findlay looked at him for a moment and then spoke.

"I was thinkin', Corp: Is there any need for Billy to go out?"

"Why, sure," returned Bliss quickly. "I arrested him, or," grimly, "told him he was under arrest, so I'll have to go through with it. But pshaw! This other affair will wash his charge out. Don't you worry about that."

The old man nodded.

"Sure, I know. But th' very fact of having to stand his trial will queer him."

"Queer him? How?"

Findlay spat into the front of the stove.

"Don't ye know he figgers on gettin' married to Peggy O'Brien? Well, he does. And if Peggy knew he was a booze-runner she'd can him, and can him quick."

"But, good Lord! She knows he was convicted once!"

"Sure, sure. But that was long ago. Billy told th' gal he'd run straight, and if she found out diff'rent, well . . ." And the old man paused eloquently. "Then again," he went on, "he's got th' mail contract fer Sturgeon Portage, but if th' Gov'ment found out about this, they'd cancel that deal, too."

Bliss groaned. "Don't, Pete. I've got a devil of a job, but there's no need to make it harder. It's duty, you know. I can't explain it, but if ever I went back on my job I'd be a traitor to myself as well as to the whole force. Heavens above, man!" he said almost fiercely. "If there was any loophole, don't you think I'd take it?"

For a long time silence reigned in the cabin, but at last old man Findlay, with a deep sigh, got to his feet.

"Well," he said slowly, "if that's th' way ye feel about it, I guess there's no sense tryin' to argue with ye."

Bliss also stood up.

"I've got to go up to the depot and send out a telegram, so I'll walk up the road with you a piece."

He put on his cap and coat. After testing the door to the cells he stepped outside with Findlay. He slammed the door of the main room shut behind him.

At the forks of the trail leading to Findlay's cabin they parted. And once the darkness had swallowed him up, the old man struck for the direction of his cabin, fifty yards away, with a speed surprising in one of his years.

PETE FINDLAY was deep in a profound sleep the next morning when his slumbers were shattered by a peremptory knocking on his door. The old man sat up, rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and jumped out of bed to admit his visitor.

The visitor was Bliss. He eyed the old man narrowly, and then stepped inside. Findlay seemed surprised.

"Well, well!" he crowed. "Look who's here! Bright and early, ain't ye, Corp?"

He turned away, and after pitching a couple of resinous logs on the still-warm heater, squatted on the bed and loaded his pipe.

"Well, what's new?"

Bliss eyed him grimly. "I've come to tell you something."

"Yeh?"

"Yes. A funny thing happened last night. When I got back from the depot, I found somebody had entered the barracks and had gone again. Not by the door. That was locked. By the window."

"Gosh!" The old man's eyes were wide with innocence.

"Another funny thing: Those two bottles had been tampered with, for one was uncorked."

"That so? Why d'ye say tampered with? Mebbe it blew off. Th' hooch inside was prob'ly pretty stout."

"Hardly." The policeman's next words were very slow. "For it wasn't whiskey in that bottle. It was cold tea!"

"Well, what d'ye know about that?" gasped Findlay.

"It looked to me," said Bliss, ignoring the question, "as though the man that had tampered with the bottles had been in a hurry. That, or he had left the cork off to draw my attention to it."

Findlay did not speak. His face was that of one overwhelmed with stunning news.

"D'you see where that leaves me?" asked Bliss.

"No. I dunno."

The policeman favored the ancient with a cynical look.

"No. You wouldn't. . . . It means that my case against Bill is knocked sky-high."

"Too bad," grunted Findlay. "But tain't no good belly-achin' about it, is it?"

"I know that," returned Bliss. "But what do I do now?"

Findlay considered. "Any tracks around th' place?"

"No."

"Any clues?"

"No."

"Well; ain't ye got no suspicions?"

"Suspicions!" Bliss repeated sourly. "You can't hang a man on suspicions!"

"Then," wisely chuckled the old man, "ye'd better forget it. A danged fool ye'd look climbin' up in th' witness-stand with a coupla crocks o' cold tea. Wouldn't ye, Corp?" He grinned widely. "But Bill? Goin' to let 'im go?"

"Go!" snorted Bliss. "I let him go two hours ago. Was there any sense holding him with my evidence gone?"

The old man was truly surprised now. "Gone," he muttered. "Wouldn't that hog-tie an' throw ye!"

He scratched his straggly beard and then began to smile. Without another word he turned to a cupboard. After much fumbling in its interior he came back with a square-faced bottle in his hand.

He poured out two cups, generously full.

"Corp," he said, wiping away by-gones with a magnificent gesture, "all's well that ends well, as th' feller said. You're alive and kickin'; ye'll take these two cut-throats t' town, and prob'ly come back with three-up on yer arm. And ye know why, don't ye?" He looked at Bliss quizzically. "Because a certain party, who just now's high-tailin' fer town and Peggy as fast as his dogs can carry him, was too fine a lad t' see ye die. What more ye got t' worry about? Not a danged thing."

"Corp, I give ye a toast: to th' whitest, squarest-shootin' kid that ever drew breath—Billy Nelson."

And the two, the policeman in his trim uniform and old Pete Findlay in his baggy underwear, raised their cups, and drank.